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The Bells of the Sanctuary.

AGNES.

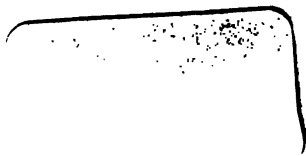
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The Bells of the Sanctuary.

AGNES.



BY

GRACE RAMSAY,

AUTHOR OF "A WOMAN'S TRIALS," "IZA'S STORY," &c.

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A G N E S .

SHE was just seventeen when I first saw her; the eldest of five sisters. She was very pretty, but so spoilt by affectation that you quite lost sight of her beauty in vexation at her conceit. She seemed incapable of losing sight of herself for one instant; no amusement had power to distract her from observing the effect she was producing; self-consciousness amounted to a mania with her. If she went for a walk on the promenade, where the music, or any other attraction, drew a number of strollers to the spot, Agnes made herself a nuisance to everybody by the absurd affectation of her demeanour.

“People are looking at me! How dreadful it is! Let us go to some place where I shan’t be stared at in this way. Did you see how that gentleman looked at me?” and so on.

It was true she was a pretty girl, and as such

may have come in for more observation than a plain one; but the word "grimacière" was written so legibly on her face and her person altogether, that I am satisfied most of the glances were directed to her less in admiration than in criticism. Anything and everything was a pretext *pour se mettre en scène*. If she saw children playing near the water, or sitting on the ledge of one of the fountains, she would clasp her hands, utter a little scream of terror, and beseech everybody to interfere, or else infallibly the little creatures would fall in, or fall over, and be drowned.

"There is not the remotest danger of such a catastrophe, and, if there were, their mothers and *bonnes* are there to look after them," some one would object; "there is no reason for you to excite yourself about it."

"True; mais je suis si sensible! J'ai tant de cœur!" Agnes would answer, with a sigh, and, casting down her eyes, assume a new *pose*.

In fact, her life was a succession of *poses*, changing as place and opportunity suggested. Her temper, without being a bad one, was capricious, varying with her attitudes, and very

disagreeable to live with ; like all people who are too much absorbed in themselves, she was apt to be very forgetful of others. The only excuse that could be urged for the undisciplined silliness of her character and manner was her health, which had been so precarious and delicate from her cradle up as to render culture and restraint alike impossible. As a baby, she must not be thwarted in any infantine wilfulness, lest it should make her cry, and bring on convulsions. She had scarcely emerged from babyhood when she became a martyr to headaches that had never deserted her since. This furnished a pretext, not unreasonably, for emancipating her from lessons ; and Agnes being, like the generality of human children, antagonistic to that bug-bear of the nursery—her spelling book—took the full value out of her headaches, and till she was quite a big girl could neither read nor write.

When she arrived at the age of fourteen it dawned upon her that she was a dunce, and that dunces, even when blessed with pretty faces, are not usually much admired or considered by their fellow-creatures. This discovery

was unpleasant, and the remedy, though it was still in her hands, appeared to Agnes nearly as unpleasant as the evil. She hated study, and from not having had her mind gradually trained to the effort which it demands, even from the brightest children, before they take to it for its own sake, the simplest task was ten times more irksome and difficult to her than it need have been. She tried to make up in some degree for lost time by applying herself to books at home, but the result was so inadequate to the labour that she soon gave it up in disgust. Two of her sisters had now been a year and a half at the Sacré Cœur, and they gave such pleasant accounts of their life there, that, though the division of work and play struck her as too disproportionately in favour of the former to be thoroughly satisfactory, Agnes was tempted to try it. Her parents were delighted to let her make the experiment, and when her sisters were returning after the Midsummer holidays they got everything ready for her to accompany them.

The trial was not very successful. Agnes was, of course, put into one of the junior classes,

a position very mortifying to her vanity, and though the nuns, making allowance for the disadvantages under which she was placed, stretched indulgence to its utmost limits, she was not able to keep up with her little competitors. Her headaches, which, at first, owing probably to the change of scene and habit, had improved, grew more frequent and painful as the trimestre advanced, and, at last, the slightest mental exertion so palpably increased her sufferings, that she was obliged to leave. Disappointed and disheartened she resigned herself to being a dunce, and relapsed into her old life of idleness and inaction. Her health rallied after a while, and she again resumed the attempt at studying by herself. It was of short duration, however. Like many an older and more experienced student, she attempted too much, and, failing, gave it all up in despair. Twice in the course of the following year she returned to the Convent, but with no better success than on the first occasion. So it happened that, at the age of sixteen, Agnes was as backward in the ordinary rudiments of knowledge as most children at ten. The only thing that gave any hope of her ultimately repairing

the gap in her education was, that she had acquired a steady taste for reading. Even when her headaches prevented her from taking any part in the conversation, or remaining in the drawing-room when it was going on, she was able to read for hours in her own room, without apparently increasing the pain. Just when I became acquainted with her she was reading Racine, and used to talk with intelligent enthusiasm about his works and others that she had recently read. Her mind, hitherto a complete blank, seemed emerging at this period from its apathetic condition, and though she discovered no signs of talent, it was clear that she was not deficient in ability, and that she only wanted a fair chance to develop into a very intelligent woman.

She was exquisitely neat in her person, not extravagantly fond of dress, but paying a great deal of attention to it, and so very hard to please in the choice and fit of her clothes, that the *femme-de-chambre* who waited on her and her sisters, used to say that Mademoiselle Agnes gave her more trouble about her *toilette* than toutes ces demoiselles together.

Her room was a pattern of neatness, and she

took pleasure in making it look pretty with all sorts of knick-knacks. In one corner she had a little altar, with flowers and candelabra surrounding a beautiful statue of the Immaculate Conception; on the wall above hung a large crucifix; and in front stood a priedieu, with a daintily embroidered cushion. Here Agnes performed her devotions; being debarred by her health from assisting regularly at daily Mass, she had taken pains to make her little oratory as complete and suggestive as possible; she was her own sacristan, and never allowed anyone to assist her in the services it required. She had a tender devotion to Our Lady, and without committing herself to *la vie dévote*, she was genuinely pious; but her piety, though it was sincere, was not sufficiently active to control her character, and bring under subjection the inordinate love of notoriety, which made her so ridiculous, and, at times, so disagreeable.

However, taking her, with all her faults, she was a bright young creature, and inspired you with that sort of kindly, superficial interest, which extreme youth, combined with no incon-

siderable beauty, never fails to secure to its possessor.

One of her sisters, Jeanne, was at school at V——, at the Convent of the Sainte Enfance, and Agnes, one morning, suggested that we should go and see her, and visit the Convent where she herself had spent a few months in one of her abortive attempts at getting educated. There was a nun also there whom she was very fond of, and went to see occasionally. This nun, Sœur Madeleine, I think, was her name, came to the parlour with Jeanne, and while the sisters chatted together over their little private affairs, Agnes relating all the home news to Jeanne, and Jeanne confiding her scrapes and fun, and petitions for home to Agnes, Sœur Madeleine talked to me. I have related elsewhere* the subject that was engrossing my thoughts at that moment, and how startled I was on mentioning it to Sœur Madeleine, to find that a community of Poor Clares were just then receiving the hospitality of the Sainte Enfance, while their monastery was being rebuilt. I had an interview, or, more properly speaking,

* Vide "Benedicta," First Bell.

an audience with the Abbess there and then, and having learned all I was anxious to know, had no idea of again renewing communications with her. Next day I was surprised to see Agnes arrive with a note to me, from Sœur Madeleine, requesting that I would go and see her that afternoon before three o'clock. We both set off at once, not a little mystified by the summons, and losing ourselves all the way in conjectures as to what it could possibly mean. The explanation was very simple, though it was a great surprise to me. It appeared that soon after we left, the day before, the Bishop of the Diocese had come to visit the Poor Clares, and Sœur Madeleine, seeing how interested I was in learning all that concerned them, asked His Grace permission for me to *see* the Abbess at the little monastery which she and the Mère Dépositaire were going next day to inspect, before returning to it finally, and the Bishop had kindly granted the permission. We had half-an-hour to wait before they started, and I was glad to spend it in the garden with the Sœur Madeleine. The heat was overpowering. I recollect the day as one of the

hottest of an exceptionally hot summer ; Agnes and I were grumbling in our muslins, and pitying Sœur Madeleine in her black stuff habit.

“ Yes,” she said, laughing, “ it doesn’t look very cool ; but what is it compared to the habit of the Pauvres Clarisses ? Theirs is as coarse and as heavy as a carpet. See ! their windows are closed too ; they do not give themselves the luxury of fresh air in the room that looks on the garden, because the noise of the children at recreation, and the voices of the visitors, and people passing to and fro, would break the silence, and distract them at their meditations. Notre Mère went to see them a few days ago in the back room where they work. Notre Mère has permission. Well, only fancy, in this dreadful heat they had the window closed. Notre Mère nearly fainted when she went in, the room was so close, but thinking it was against their rule to open it, she said nothing. When she was going away, however, the Abbess went with her to the door, and in the humblest way asked her if it would be possible to have the window opened. The espagnolette was broken, or stiff, or something, and they could

not turn it. You can imagine how vexed notre Mère was to find they had been suffering such an extra privation through our fault. She immediately sent up the gardener to arrange it, and the next time she went to see them, the Abbess thanked her as if she had done them the greatest favour, only they were afraid we had been scandalized at their self-indulgence in complaining about such a trifle; but it was she who was to blame, the Abbess said; she was afraid the novices might fall ill for want of air; but they had not complained. Notre Mère said she was as timid as a child, apologizing for it, and so frightened that they had been a scandal to us. It makes us feel like Syberites to see the life they lead."

"It is a wonderful life," I said. "It sets one speculating whether they can have the same sort of souls to save, and the same interests at stake, and the same heaven in view as we common Christians, who take it all so easy."

"Oh, yes, indeed it does," answered Sœur Madeleine, humbly. "Even we, who have given up something in coming into the Con-

vent, we feel so worldly, so luxurious beside them. It is a great privilege to be allowed to have them under our roof for a time, and we feel palpably that they are drawing down a blessing upon us. Notre Mère says she is quite certain that many graces which have been granted to us lately, and that we have been praying for for years, are entirely owing to their prayers. But it is no wonder; they are Saints; they must have great power with God."

"Do you know anything of the previous history of any of them?" I enquired.

"No; not even their names," replied Sœur Madeleine. "All we know of the Abbess is that she has been forty years in religion, and that she was twenty when she entered. She has one brother, who had never seen her, of course, since she took the veil. When the Poor Clares were going to leave their cloister she wrote to him to say that if he were here the day they moved he could see her, and they might embrace once more before they met in heaven. He was away in Spain when he got the letter, but he started off at once, travelled thirty hours

without stopping, and arrived just as the Abbess was stepping into the cab; he caught her in his arms for a moment, and they kissed each other; then he let her go, and they parted without a word. He followed her here on foot to see the place she was coming to. *Pauvre garçon!*" continued Sœur Madeleine, brushing away a tear, "he found her greatly changed after forty years; though notre Mère says no one would believe she was sixty; she looks twenty years younger, and must have been quite beautiful; her brother said she was; he cried like a little child when he was talking to notre Mère about her. He went back to Spain next day."

Agnes listened without a word of comment, but evidently with the deepest interest to all that Sœur Madeleine had to tell of their gentle, saintly guests, and when the cab came to take the Abbess and her assistant to the monastery, she rose to accompany me after them. As I did not know the street, I took for granted she was coming merely to show me the way. It did not occur to me that she meant to include herself in my passport to the Sanctum Sancto-

rum. As we drew near the Convent I discovered, however, that this was her intention.

"You won't be allowed in, Agnes," I said; "the permission was only given for me."

"Oh, I entreat you, let me go with you!" she exclaimed, in an imploring voice; "they will think we are sisters, and if you don't say anything they will let me in with you."

I did not at all care to have her accompany me, and I could see no reason for her extraordinary eagerness beyond idle curiosity, and, perhaps, the perspective of a good sentimental opportunity. I could not, however, refuse to let her take her chance.

The door was opened by a *tourière*. I made my speech, said I came by permission of *Monseigneur*, making no allusion to my companion. The Abbess had left word that I was to be admitted, and the *tourière*, as Agnes had counted, including her in the order, made no difficulty of letting us both in. The monastery was quite unfurnished; there was nothing but bare walls to be seen; but even these were invested with the mysterious interest that attaches itself to the Unknown and the Invisible. The rooms

were small, and on the ground floor, with the exception of the Chapel, there was nothing in them that differed materially from any ordinary house. The nuns, we were told, were up-stairs. Agnes and I ascended the narrow stair, she holding close to me, as if she were afraid I would escape, and leave her alone, outside the Presence Chamber. The Abbess came to meet us, however, and I introduced her at once, making the best apology I could for bringing her with me, and we both knelt down for her blessing. Then Agnes withdrew and left me alone with her. She took me round to look at the little there was to see, entering minutely and with great simplicity into all the observances of the rule.

The dormitory was a long room, cut up on one side into narrow strips of rooms by a lath and plaster partition, which did not ascend to the ceiling, but served rather as a screen to isolate the nuns in separate cells. There was not a chair or a bench to be seen; but in the centre of one room there were arranged a number of long sacks, that looked like monster grey sausages; they were filled with something that I fancied might be sand, they were so

round and firm. The Abbess invited me to sit down on one of them while we continued our conversation. I did, or rather I tried; for the bag was stuffed so tight, and it was so round and hard and slippery, that it was quite a feat to maintain one's centre of gravity on it, and I kept constantly sliding down and pulling myself up again in the most uncomfortable manner. The Abbess noticed the difficulties under which I was labouring, and was distressed for me.

"Vous êtes bien mal à notre aise, mon enfant?" she said.

"O, not at all, ma Mère!" I declared, with unblushing hypocrisy; "but if it is not an indiscreet question, may I ask what is packed so tight in these bags?"

"They are our beds!" she answered, and laughed a sweet, low laugh as an exclamation of horror involuntarily escaped me.

"How long do you sleep on them ma Mère?" I asked.

"From half-past nine till midnight, and then from two till five."

"Have you office during the two intervening hours?" I enquired.

“One hour of office and one of oraison. During this last we transport ourselves in spirit to all the places where at that moment our dear Lord is being most neglected and outraged, and we pray for the sinners who are offending His Divine Majesty, and we strive to console Him by our love. We call this exercise the hour of Gethsemane, in commemoration of the agony that oppressed His Sacred Heart when the sins of the whole world passed before Him, and when even His Apostles slept, and there was no one by to comfort Him.”

“And don’t you sometimes fall asleep *ma Mère*?” I said; “it must be impossible to keep awake in perfect silence for a whole hour when one has been woke up out of a sound sleep?”

“In the beginning it is difficult,” she replied, “the novices, especially the very young ones, have to fight hard to keep themselves awake; but they soon get used to it, and after a time it is the exercise they like best. It is such a beautiful thought—such a joy to feel that one is suffering a little for our dear Lord, and keeping Him company in His loneliness!”

There was a charm and a sweetness in her

voice that are indescribable, and that made me long to look at her face—I could only see her mouth and chin, for the coarse serge veil concealed the upper part of it. The heat was so sultry that I wondered how she could breathe under such a weight of wool, and prompted really more by a desire to relieve her of it for a moment than from curiosity to behold her, I asked if she would not raise her veil, as I had been told my privilege was to extend so far. She lifted it at once and went on talking. I was prepared by what Sœur Madeleine had said, to see the remains of beauty, but what I saw far surpassed my expectations. The skin was as white and almost as smooth as ivory; the mouth was chiselled; the nose small and sufficiently verging on the aquiline to give a touch of majesty to the face, whose delicately classic lines reminded you of one of the exquisite Vestal heads we sometimes see on cameos; her eyes were dark, but so limpid that, when the light fell full on them, they were as luminous as translucent gold.* The

* Once subsequently, but never before, the writer has seen this same peculiar lambent light in the eyes of a Carmelite.

face was perfectly colourless, the lips alone relieving its ivory pallor by a faint pink glow. "Notre Mère" was right: no one could believe the Abbess to be sixty years of age, and she was still very beautiful. After a few minutes she let her veil drop; it was evidently painful to her to remain uncovered, so I did not ask her to raise it again. She was deeply interested in all I had to tell about my friend whose vocation had led me to seek the acquaintance of the Poor Clares; and promised that she and the other sisters would pray for her with all their hearts.

The *dépositaire* having overlooked every place, and given any instructions that were necessary for the final arrangements, now came to say it was time to return to their temporary home.

Agnes, who had been talking to her while the Abbess was engaged with me, was standing outside the landing, apparently waiting for me to rejoin her. I knelt down to receive the parting blessing of the Abbess, and then fell back to let her pass out before me. She did so, but stopped suddenly in the narrow doorway, utter-

ing an exclamation of alarm or astonishment. I ran forward to see what was the matter, and beheld Agnes on her knees, clinging to the Abbess and sobbing convulsively. The Abbess laid her hand upon her head, and speaking to her with great tenderness, strove to raise her, or to elicit some explanation of her grief. But Agnes only sobbed and clung to her.

The Abbess in despair looked round at me. I felt satisfied it was all a piece of acting to make herself interesting in the eyes of the two nuns, and I felt very much inclined to say so and give her a good shaking. I controlled myself, however, so far as to look blank and mystified, and taking her by the hand I begged her to come away. After sobbing out an entreaty to the Abbess to pray for her, she was induced to rise and let me lead her downstairs. Though I did not entertain a moment's doubt but that the sobs and tears were part of a scene got up from mere vanity and excitability, I was startled by the vehemence with which she played her part, and the reality of emotion that she threw into it. But this only exasperated me the more, because I saw the Abbess believed in

the performance, and was distressed and frightened; so as soon as we were out of ear-shot at the bottom of the stairs I relieved myself by a suppressed burst of indignation.

"The idea of your making such a piece of work!" I said, "terrifying those dear Clarisses in that way; you should not have forced yourself in on them if you could not control your feelings; though what there is in that sweet old Abbess to send any one into hysterics passes my comprehension!"

Agnes, without testifying the least resentment, pressed my arm, and struggled to keep down the sobs that were still choking her, but did not attempt to speak till we had helped the nuns into their cab, and it was off before us on the road. Then she said:

"I am very sorry; but I could not help it, indeed I could not. There was something in the voice of the *Mère Abbess*, and in the touch of her hand when she laid it on my head, that seemed to break my heart, and make me feel as if I could never go away from her. Oh, *chère amie*, how I wish I were a Poor Clare!"

I burst out laughing.

“Don’t laugh!” said Agnes, not the least ruffled or affronted; “I mean what I say; I would give everything I have this minute to be one. I would rather be a Poor Clare than a Queen!”

“I have no doubt you would,” I replied, and so would anybody in their right mind, if it could be done for the wishing; but when it comes to perpetual silence, and perpetual fasting, and midnight vigils, and walking bare-foot, and being cased in a woollen carpet, and all the other ascetic delights that make up the reality of the Poor Clare’s life, I think we are all safe to admire, rather than imitate the picture. And just see what a state you have put your eyes in!” I continued, looking at her swollen lids, and her face blurred with tears; “what will they say at home when they see you!”

Agnes had quite forgotten this consequence of her emotion, and now it embarrassed her; she proposed instead of going straight home we should return to the Sainte Enfance, where she could bathe her eyes, and make herself a little presentable.

Sœur Madeleine sent her off to the lavatory,

and then appealed to me for an explanation of the tears. She shook her head when I had related the episode with the Abbess.

"I was provoked out of all patience with her, ma Sœur," I said; "and then the idea of her carrying on the comedy with me, and talking about being a Poor Clare!"

"Yes," said Sœur Madeleine, "and the worst of it is that this constant *mise-en-scène* that she indulges in makes it next to impossible to know what is genuine in her feelings from what is not."

"But you do not think that any part of this was genuine?" I said, "that she was suddenly seized with a vocation to the Poor Clares?"

Sœur Madeleine hesitated, and raised her shoulders with a dubious shrug.

"One can never tell," she said after a pause; "the law of vocations is so altogether mysterious and supernatural. Si le bon Dieu voulait"

"Oh, si le bon Dieu voulait, il pourrait faire un miracle!" I acquiesced laughing; "but do you think Agnes at all a likely subject for such a miracle as that, ma Sœur?"

“No, I certainly do not; but I think that if she ever did become a nun, it would more likely be in an out-and-out austere order like St. Clare’s, than in one like ours for instance. She is a strange child; I had her under my eye for two months, and I watched her closely; I think she has immense capabilities for good, and if once she were roused to assert them, there is no saying what might come of it. *Et puis, voyez-vous,*” she added with a singularly expressive look, “*elle aime beaucoup la Sainte Vierge cette enfant.*”

We left V——, and returned to Paris. It was six months before I again saw Agnes. She wrote to me occasionally, and generally mentioned the poor Clares, in whose chapel she assisted at seven o’clock Mass every morning latterly. I was glad to hear this, because it argued a great improvement in her health; but the circumstance never struck me as foreshadowing anything more important. Soon after she told me of it her mother came to see us, and I was surprised to hear that her headaches, instead of being better were quite as bad, and at intervals even more distressing than

formerly. I alluded with astonishment to her being able to go to daily Mass at such an early hour.

"I don't know how it is," replied her mother, "but she says it does not fatigue her ; of late she seems to have more energy in fighting against pain ; she is somehow changed altogether ; her character has, as it were, entered on a new phase, and shaken off the enfantillage that had clung to it up to the present ; it has taken a much more serious turn. *Les petites vanités* that she used to attach so much importance to, have lost all their charm for her ; and the only thing she seems to care for in the way of amusement is reading."

I learned from others more minute particulars about this change in Agnes's character and tastes. Everybody who saw her was struck by it. The restless longing for notoriety that had hitherto been so manifest had quite disappeared, and given place to a dignified modesty that added a charm to her beauty as much as to her manner, and won her, now that she had ceased to court it, all the admiration she had formerly been so eager to attract.

It was not many months after this visit of her mother's, about a year from the date of our acquaintance with Agnes, that a great change took place in the worldly affairs of her family. Up to the present she and her sisters had been brought up with the certain prospect of handsome fortunes; nothing was spared on their education, and they were allowed a latitude of expense in other ways in keeping with the expectations of the daughters of a man of large and secure income; the elder girls dressed, not extravagantly, but with an elegance that necessitated rather formidable milliners' bills; their habits altogether were luxurious; and they had never been taught to consult economy in any department. With these tastes and antecedents they were badly fitted to meet and grapple with the altered fortunes that were in store for them. Their father had involved himself in large financial speculations for some time past; they were, as so often occurs in similar cases, brilliantly successful at first, and fully justified his somewhat rash and sanguine anticipations; but the failure of an important house concerned in them, consequently checked

their career ; and, one fine morning, Monsieur X—— woke up to find himself a bankrupt, and his children beggars. Although for more than a month he had foreseen such a catastrophe as all but inevitable, he kept the knowledge a profound secret even from his wife. She noticed his care-worn looks with some anxiety ; but never dreamed of attributing them to their real cause ; thought he was tired and wanted change—anything rather than the truth—and so, happy in him and in her children, she lived on, unsuspecting of the gathering thunder-cloud that was about to burst over her little paradise. It did burst. But it did not crush her. Instead of reproaching her husband with the misfortunes which had brought ruin and desolation upon her and her children, instead of upbraiding him for the want of frankness which had led her on blind-folded and unprepared to the very edge of the gulf, she roused all her energy to meet the demand upon her fortitude, to sustain her husband, and to ward off the first bitterness of the blow from her children. She had passed for rather a common-place character in her easy-going days of prosperity ; but in this hour

of trial the wife and the mother rose up in all their strength and tenderness, and asserting themselves with the majesty of self-devotion; transformed the woman into a heroine. Those who knew her best were startled at the way in which she revealed herself, as much as by the prompt intelligence she displayed in confronting the position of her affairs. She made herself at once acquainted with every detail of the circumstances. From beginning to end her husband had acted with unflinching integrity. He had wronged himself and his children; but he had, intentionally, wronged no one else; even if material evidence had been wanting to this effect, the spirit in which he accepted his disaster was sufficient proof of it to his wife. Their ruin was complete. Nothing remained of his own ample fortune, and only a small pittance of Madame X——'s *dot*, which happened to have been so placed by marriage settlements as to make it unavailable for the "bons placements" in which the rest had been swamped, was rescued from the wreck. This would still enable her to keep her children in the very humblest way at home; but there was

of course nothing left for the expenses of education. This she resolved to undertake herself, and assisted by Jeanne, who was now sixteen, very intelligent, a good musician, and up to this point very well educated, she hoped to make up to the little ones for the advantages from which they had been prematurely cut off. Madame X—— talked over all this with her husband, looking the prospect boldly in the face, and reducing all their hopes for the future to practical schemes for the present. He, manlike, was too stunned by the blow at first, and too despondent to look beyond the disasters of to-day; but when she told him he would rally soon, and then with his natural ability and education, and influential connexions, be sure to obtain some honourable appointment, either at home or abroad, which, if it did not replace him in the position he had lost, would at least enable him to live and to make some provision for the children, he listened to her, trying to believe it, and yielded himself up to her guidance with the passive confidence of a child.

But this woman who was so brave for him, and so heroically forgetful of herself, was a

coward for her little ones. She could not bring herself to tell them the truth. From day to day she put it off, on one pretext or another, always resolving that to-morrow she would speak to them ; and to-morrow came and found her as irresolute as yesterday. After all there was no hurry ; better wait a little ; there was a seizure in the house ; all their costly furniture, the precious household gods, were to go in the general wreck ; but it would not be till the end of the month, the creditors had mercifully granted that delay, and she could prepare the children meantime gradually to hear the truth. The midsummer holidays were at hand when Jeanne and her sister would be home, and this would furnish an excuse for an excursion to some distant place, where they would start on their new life of poverty and toil amongst strangers, and so escape the humiliation of outstaying their bankruptcy in the place where they were all known.

More than a week elapsed, and the children were still in happy ignorance of the terrible break-up that was threatening their young lives ; they went on in the usual way, practising

and working, and making their little *parties* into the neighbouring woods, enjoying the innocent pleasures of the day, and sleeping the happy, dreamless sleep of their age.

It was for Agnes that both her parents feared most ; her health had always been so delicate, how would it withstand this shock ? She who had been nurtured like a hot-house plant, sheltered so tenderly from every breath of wind and every shadow of fatigue, how would she bear the life of privation that was before her ? Her father, who had maintained an attitude of passive endurance under every other menace of the future, broke down before this one ; and when alone with his wife, gave way to passionate grief and self-reproach on account of Agnes.

“Courage, *mon ami* !” Madame X—— would say to him, with a cheerfulness that her heart belied ; “let us trust in God ! She has a father in heaven who loves her better than you ; He will take care of her.”

A fortnight dragged on ; the plan of a journey to the south had been discussed before the children, and joyfully approved of, as any plan promising change and excite-

ment was always sure to be. Hints were then thrown out that it might be found necessary for them to remain in the south, that certain losses which their father had sustained lately in money matters might make it impossible for them to come back and go on living as they were, &c. But the truth foreshadowed in this abstract way made no deep impression, and was far from exciting any alarm in their minds. The days went on, and they drew nearer and nearer to the crisis when a revelation of the whole unvarnished truth was inevitable, and still Madame X—— shrank from speaking out. More than once she had taken Jeanne and Agnes for a walk by themselves with the intention of talking to them on the subject, and each time her heart, with motherful cowardice, failed her.

Things were in this state, when, early one morning, the Marquise de —— came to pay Madame X—— a visit. This lady was spending the summer at V——, with her son, a young man of six-and-twenty, who was heir to a large fortune, and the idol of his mother. After some preliminary conversations on indifferent

subjects, Madame de —— began to speak of Agnes in terms of the greatest admiration. She praised her beauty, her modesty, which lent such an additional grace to it, her gentleness, her piety, till Madame X—— was at a loss for words to deprecate the eulogy with becoming humility. When she had exhausted herself in praises of Agnes, the Marquise intoned those of her son. No mother ever had such a son, or ever could have; he had never given her a moment's pain or anxiety; he had every virtue under the sun, and not a single fault; he loved his home; he had no tastes that were not refined, no pursuits that were not ennobling, no companions who were not honourable and well-conducted.

“In fact,” said the Marquise, bringing her panegyric to a climax, “si je n'étais pas sa mère, Madame, je dirais que mon fils est une perle!”

Madame X—— was a French woman; she knew as well as Madame de —— what this double panegyric was meant to preface, and what was the motive of this early visit. Alas! if it had been only a month ago, how gladly she would have hailed such an offer for her

child! How radiantly she would have responded to the Marquise's graceful encomiums on Agnes; how warmly she would have echoed those she lavished on her son! But they fell cold on her now. They could avail nothing. Agnes was a portionless girl—a bankrupt's daughter; if the Marquise knew this, she would no more think of offering her son to her than of making her family a present of half her fortune. Why should she? Would Madame X—— do it in her place? No mother in France would. Madame X—— almost wished the Marquise had known the truth, and not forced her to the painful alternative of either seeming to slight her offer, or having to expose her own misfortunes. She made some complimentary remarks on the excellence of the young Marquis's disposition, and gratulated his mother on having such a son; then, intending to give the conversation a more general turn, she observed that although girls were a great comfort, they were an immense responsibility, and that she had often wished it had pleased God to give her a son. This last remark was either wilfully or accidentally misunderstood by the Marquise,

who exclaimed quickly, holding out her hand to Madame X——,

“He offers you mine, *chère Madame*: take him, and give me Agnes in exchange.”

Madame X—— was at a loss what to say.

“You do Agnes, and all of us, a great honour by such an offer,” she said, at last; “and I wish it were possible for us to accept it; but Agnes is so young—much younger than most girls of eighteen; her health has kept her back in every way. I fear she would not be at all a suitable wife for your son.”

“That is for him to decide,” said the Marquise, laughing; “he does not object to it, being somewhat in the same predicament himself; it is a defect they will get cured of together; and, besides, it is not any given number of years, or their equivalent, that a young man looks for in a wife, so much as good principles, amiability, and charm; and where will he find all this better than in Agnes?”

“Her youth is not the only obstacle,” persisted Madame X——; “the disparity between her fortune and your son’s is great—greater than you suppose. We have lived hitherto in a way that has altogether misled you on this point.”

"It is one to which myself and my son are completely indifferent," said Madame de —, emphatically; "his fortune is large enough for himself and his wife, and he has no desire to increase it. Albert has always had a horror of what we call in marriage d'argent."

"He is an exception to all the young men of his day," observed Madame X——, with a sigh. "Oh! if this had but come a month since, Agnes might have been his wife now, and . . ."

"He is an exception," repeated the mother, proudly; "and so is Agnes; they are made for each other; let us not place imaginary obstacles in the way of a union that has in itself every element of happiness."

"Would that they were imaginary, or that any act or sacrifice of mine could overcome them!" exclaimed Madame X——; and, unable to control her feelings, she burst into tears. Soon recovering herself, however, she bluntly told the Marquise that owing to recent embarrassments they were not in a position to give one fraction to their daughter on her marriage.

"That is perfectly immaterial to us," observed the Marquise, with a contemptuous wave of her hand.

Madame X—— was in despair.

“Madame de Marquise,” she said, “your generosity forces me to an avowal which, for my husband’s sake, I would have suppressed, if possible: he is at this moment a bankrupt! We have lost everything, and our children are beggars!”

“I know it; I know all,” answered the Marquise.

“And knowing all, you still . . .” Madame X—— stopped, astonishment choked the words in her throat.

“I still ask you to give me Agnes for my son.”

Madame X—— could not command her voice to answer, but she held out her arms to the Marquise.

The two mothers embraced and wept together for a moment in silence.

“I know everything,” resumed Madame de ——, after their emotion had relieved itself in tears; “I have known it from the first. Your misfortunes are less of a secret than you imagine; but you would not regret it if you knew what universal sympathy they have inspired,

and what admiration and respect are felt for your husband's honourable conduct, and your own resignation and fortitude."

Once the ice was broken, it was a relief to Madame X—— to unburthen her heart of the anxieties that had been pent up in it so long without the solace of friendly sympathy, and to find that their misfortunes, instead of being an obstacle to Agnes's making a happy and brilliant marriage, had been the means of hastening its accomplishment.

Madame de —— informed her that her son, who had seen Agnes several times in society, in church, and out walking, had been very much struck by her; so much so, that two months ago, on coming out of the Cathedral, where, to the detriment it is to be feared of his own devotions, he had watched her during Mass, he told his mother that if he were inclined to marry that was the girl he would like. This admiration grew every time he saw her; but though opportunities were not lacking, the habits of French society prevented his taking advantage of them to acquaint Agnes with his feelings, or attempt to win her good opinion.

■ .

His mother, who believed her younger than she was even, did not particularly encourage Albert in his fancy; she did not oppose it, however, only advised him to wait till he had seen a little more of the world, and a greater variety of eligible young ladies. Agnes was safe not to be run away with for a year to come, and if, at the end of that time, he still preferred her to anyone else, he should have her blessing and consent to his marriage. But before three months had elapsed total ruin had overtaken the X—— family. The Marquise was one of the first to hear it, through a friend who was himself considerably compromised in the disaster; but she heard at the same time how nobly the bankrupt father had behaved, how regardless he had shown himself of his own interests till the interests of those who had trusted him were secured. His wife's conduct was beyond all praise, and while it inspired admiration for herself, it drew additional sympathy round her husband. No one felt more sincerely for the brave-hearted mother than Madame de —— did; but when her son announced his determination to marry the bankrupt's daughter with-

out further delay, she protested. Such an alliance was not to be contemplated for the Marquis de ——. It was very noble of Albert to think of it, of course, and his mother admired him for it; but it was her duty to stand between him and such a boyish freak of romance. To her astonishment, Albert, for the first time in his life, rebelled. He declared that he loved this penniless girl; that he would marry her, and win a claim to her gratitude by placing his fortune at her feet in time to rescue her father from ruin; if his mother loved him and valued his happiness, as she professed to do, instead of thwarting it now that it was in his reach, and making him miserable for the rest of his life, she would assist him in obtaining it, and go, without further delay, to make an offer of his hand to M. and Madame X——. The rebellion lasted for three whole days, during which time it was a question which of the two was most miserable, the mother or the son. On the morning of the fourth day, Madame de —— acknowledged herself in the wrong, and, yielding to the generous and reasonable arguments of the young lover, surrendered unconditionally.

Having once laid down her arms as an antagonist, she took them up as an ally, and that very hour set off to plead his cause with Agnes's parents. We have seen with what result.

As soon as everything had been explained between the two ladies, Madame de —— requested her friend to go for Agnes. She did so; but here, in the quarter where she least expected it, a powerful antagonist lay in wait.

I have already mentioned the marked change which had come over Agnes, and if I have not dwelt upon it in detail, it arises from the fact that no incidents occurred to emphasize the change which could afford material for narrative. It was not the circumstances of her life that were altered, but the colour and tone of it. The first idea of a religious vocation which had translated itself in that hysterical scene at the Poor Clares, had gradually grown and strengthened, till the thought grew into desire, and desire into determination, and an ardent longing for the perfect life possessed her soul, haunting it night and day. As yet, she had not spoken of it to anyone, for though the resolve was deep and firm, it was still undefined as to the

exact time for carrying it out. That morning, however, during the thanksgiving after Communion, the impulse came upon her so strongly that, unable to resist it, she pledged herself to its execution for the following Sunday, made the offertory of herself to Our Lord, and promised to dedicate her life to His Cross as a daughter of St. Clare.

She came home, intending to acquaint her mother with what she had done, and request her to break the intelligence to her father and her sisters. But when she found herself in the midst of them all again at breakfast, the effort which, in the illuminated strength of prayer, had seemed so easy, assumed a strangely different aspect. The cross which had lain so lightly on her an hour ago was weighted now to agony, and instead of seeking her mother at once, as she had intended, Agnes escaped to her own room, and spent the morning alone, bracing up her courage for the coming ordeal. On her knees, with her crucifix in her hand, she was strong; but the moment she stood up her courage sank. She remained, therefore, almost uninterruptedly in prayer, fighting against her

own heart, and wrestling with God in her helplessness.

When Madame X—— opened the door she was startled at the almost extatic fervour of the young girl's attitude, as she knelt, not on the prie-dieu, but on the ground, beside it, her hands clasping her crucifix, and her head bowed on her breast. The mother saw no vision of angels hovering above her child, she caught no echo of the seraph choir, "harping on their harps" the canticle of that white-robed virgin train who follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth ; she only saw that Agnes was bathed in a halo of modest loveliness that surpassed anything she had ever seen before, and a thrill of innocent, motherful pride, which surely the angels did not reprove, quickened her heart at the thought that if her child had neither gold nor silver, she had yet a dower that was more precious than both.

"Agnes !" said her mother, softly.

Agnes looked up, but, instead of rising to meet her, she stretched out her hand to Madame X——, and motioned to her to come and kneel down beside her.

"Let us say a prayer together, mother," she said.

Madame X—— knelt down, and giving utterance to the emotions that were overflowing her soul, she gave out the first verse of the Magnificat. Agnes was struck by the selection of the song of praise so admirably suited to her own feelings at that moment, and answered every alternate verse with an exultant fervour, that seemed to her mother like a prophetic response to the glad tidings she was about to announce.

"He who is mighty has, indeed, done great things for you, my child. Let us give Him thanks with all our hearts," exclaimed Madame X——, rising from her knees, and embracing Agnes, while tears of gratitude streamed down her face.

Perplexed by this preface, and not conjecturing in the remotest degree what it portended, Agnes listened in silence while her mother related the joyful news. When they were told she remained perfectly silent, betraying neither astonishment, nor pleasure, nor distress.

Madame X——, mistaking her silence for timidity, or the over-fulness of heart, natural

on so solemn an occasion, smiled, and caressing her tenderly—

“Come, now,” she said, “and embrace your new mother; she is waiting for you, and she is prepared to receive and love you as a daughter.”

But Agnes, instead of obeying her, stood still and dumb, rooted to the spot, looking at her mother as if she had not heard her or understood the import of her words. Then, rousing herself, and speaking in a voice of strange solemnity—

“Mother, it can never be,” she said; “I can never be a daughter to Madame de —, or her son’s wife; I am betrothed already.”

Madame X—— drew back, and only answered her by a look of displeasure and bewilderment.

“Yes, mother, I am betrothed. I can have no other spouse than Jesus. I am going to be a Poor Clare.”

“A Poor Clare!” repeated Madame X——, after staring at her for some time in dumb astonishment; “a Poor Clare! Au nom du ciel qu’est ce-que c’est que cette exaltation.”

Agnes entreated her to sit down, and hear what she had to say. The story of her voca-

tion was soon told, from that first meeting with the Abbess, which Agnes felt to be her destiny, till the definite act of renunciation which she had enregistered that morning during Mass in the little Chapel of St. Clare.

Madame X——'s first thought was, that Agnes, in some accidental way, had learned the state of her father's affairs, and that, shrinking with natural horror from the life of poverty, and perhaps toil, that was before her, and for which she was in every way so ill-adapted, had resolved, under the first impulse of grief and humiliation, to fly from it, and seek shelter in a convent; there, at least, if the material sufferings were greater than any she could be exposed to at home, they were compensated by the sense of voluntary sacrifice, and by those unearthly joys and spiritual consolations which, seen through the mystical haze of the cloister, to Agnes's over-wrought and ardent fancy, assumed, no doubt, the fascinating proportions of the supernatural, and were magnified into the visions and raptures of the Saints.


"My child," she said, with gentleness, but with an air of grave authority, "if, under

the influence of excitement, you have made any rash vow, its very rashness invalidates it; you did wrong, under any circumstances, to pledge yourself to such a step without proper counsel and direction, and without asking and obtaining the consent of your parents. If you were prompted to it by cowardice, by a reluctance to accept the cross which God, in His wisdom, has seen fit to lay upon us, you yielded to a temptation of the enemy. And do you think that God would accept, or bless a gift offered from such motives? That He would approve of your rejecting the cross of His choosing to take up one of your own? And should you persist in taking it up, do you suppose He will furnish you with the superhuman grace and strength necessary to persevere in carrying it?"

"I don't understand you, mother," replied Agnes, quietly; "I have nothing to shrink from in life that I know of, and with the exception of my health, which I cannot leave behind me, I have never had a cross of any sort."

The look of innocent surprise with which she said this convinced Madame X—— quite as

much as her words that Agnes had heard nothing. Her vocation to the Poor Clares was clearly neither prompted nor superinduced by cowardice or by despair. In one sense it was a relief; but, on the other hand, it revealed a resolution deeper and more matured than Madame X—— wished to believe in. The occasion was ripe for telling Agnes the truth concerning their reverses, and her mother availed herself of it, not, indeed, gladly, but more willingly than an hour ago she would have believed possible. She laid the stubborn facts before her: their ruin was complete; nothing remained but a pittance, just enough to give them all bread; the sale of their furniture, &c., was to take place at the end of the month; by special consideration for Monsieur X—— the creditors had put it off till then, in order to give him time to rally from the blow, and make the necessary preparations for their departure of his family. Where were they to go? How were they to live henceforth? These were the questions that had been knocking at her heart ever since the day when the disclosure of their ruin made it necessary for her to discuss the future. For herself the poor mother



cared little; but she carried in her heart the superadded sorrows of her children, foretasting with exquisite sensitiveness every privation, every pang, every humiliating consequence of the poverty that was before them. Through the weary watches of the night she had cried out to the Father, who is in heaven, to have pity on her little ones, and to let the burthen of His justice fall not upon them, but upon her; and He had heard the cry, and mercifully sent her help and comfort in the way she had least expected it.

Agnes heard the terrible story to the end, and then sat silent, like one in a dream. *Ruin, disgrace, beggary!* And she might save them from it all, and she could not! She must not! Truly, God had smiled upon the sacrifice which, but a few hours ago, she had laid at His feet; for, lo, He had sent down fire from heaven to consume it. He would have it a holocaust, a whole burnt offering; her heart, with all its capabilities of agony, every sublime renunciation, every human bond and privilege and reward, must be gathered together in one relentless grasp, and flung into the sacramental

flame. For one moment her soul was paralysed. A mist of doubt and strife and admonishing fear encompassed her ; her eyes grew dim ; she lost sight of Calvary, and the everlasting hills beyond, where the bridegroom crowned for the marriage feast sat waiting for her, and she saw nothing but a lamentable waste, full of emptiness, and darkness, and despair. But it was only for a moment, enough to make her soul go up in a loud cry for help against itself. Then she was rescued ; the glance of Jesus fell upon her heart, and hushed its terrors, and chased away the darkness.

She was inexpressibly pained and shocked ; but the idea of being false to God, and betraying her vocation for even the best and purest human consideration, she felt was inadmissible, and she said so.

Her mother, at first, incredulous, now grew pale with indignation.

“What !” she cried, “will you be so heartless to your sisters, so ungrateful to your father, and to me, as to reject a marriage that will be the salvation of us all, for the sake of following out a fanatical delusion of your own ? At the

moment when we were driven to despair, and knew not which way to turn, Providence sends us a plank in our shipwreck, and you, from a freak of sentimental piety, you fling it from you, and let us all sink, rather than renounce your own stubborn will. Agnes, it is impossible you can be so cruel !”

Agnes wept as if her heart would break, and, falling at her mother’s feet, declared she was ready to make any sacrifice on earth to prove her love and duty to her father and to her. If she were fit to help in the education of her sisters, or to gain anything for them by working at her needle, or if she had bodily strength to help in the labour of the house, which must now fall almost entirely upon themselves, she would recognise it as her duty to stay with them and bear her share of the common burthen ; but, as it was, she could only add to it. She was too ignorant and too delicate to be of the slightest use in any way, and, as to the contracting a marriage which, under the circumstances, she felt would be little short of sacrilege, going straight against the will of God, and imperilling the salvation of her im-

mortal soul, Agnes declared that no consideration on earth would ever constrain her to it.

Finding reproaches and severity unavailing, and not being in a mood just then to take up another weapon which might prove more effective, Madame X—— rose, shook herself from the embrace of the sobbing girl, and bidding her ask for light to see her wickedness and folly, returned to the salon, where the Marquise was impatiently waiting for her. She explained the cause of her absence, treating Agnes's refusal on the grounds of a religious vocation as a childish chimera, which a few days sober reflection would suffice to dispel. Madame de —— was inclined to look at it more seriously ; it might, indeed, be only a passing "exaltation," but it might be something more ; in any case, she doubted its being so rapidly disposed of as Madame X—— seemed to expect.

"Let me see her," she said ; "take me to her room, and leave us together for a little."

Madame X—— did so.

The Marquise found Agnes still weeping and agitated, but calmer than when her mother had

left her. They remained closeted together for nearly an hour.

• Madame X——, who was waiting in nervous expectation for the result of the long conference, was somewhat relieved to hear that Agnes had consented to go and spend a week with the Marquise at her country place.

“I am to call for her myself to-morrow,” said Madame de ——; “in the meantime, don’t argue with her, and, above all, don’t scold her. My impression is that we may conquer eventually; but it will not be by threats or by entreaties. It must be a matter of time. I will do my best, at any rate; she is worth it,” added the Marquise, emphatically; “she is a prize worth fighting for.”

Madame X—— was more alarmed than reassured by the anxious tone in which she made these remarks. Clearly, the conquest of this vocation, real or imaginary, which had so inopportunately started up between Agnes and the fairest earthly prospects, would be less facile than she had supposed.

Prompted by her own heart, as much as by the parting advice of the Marquise, Madame

X—— sought Agnes in her room once more, and folding her to her heart, asked her in the tenderest language to forgive her her recent harshness, expressed full confidence in her love and obedience, and promised to urge her no further on the subject, but to leave her to the dictates of duty and affection.

The Marquise came next day, and carried away Agnes. Her mother's anxiety during the ensuing week can be more readily imagined than described. She wearied heaven with prayers for the success of the happy and brilliant marriage, which would prove such a blessing to all her children, and, for the moment, every other thought and care was suspended, or merged in this all-absorbing one.

Meantime, Madame de—— made good use of her opportunities. Her son was with them at ——, and, by the most delicate and respectful devotion of his demeanour towards Agnes, seconded his mother's duel with St. Clare. He did not make love to her. In every word and act he carefully avoided all that could scare her sensitive timidity by seeming to do so; but he pleaded his cause in a language more persua-

sively eloquent than any words could have been. Fearing that his presence *en parti tiers* might embarrass the young girl, or seem like an unfair pursuit, Madame de —— had invited a few near relatives to spend that week with them at the Chateau. They knew why they were bidden, and, touched by their cousin's disinterested boyish love, as well as by Agnes's youth and beauty, they took a kindly interest in the issue of the little romance, and did their part of cousinly courtship by treating her very affectionately, and showing by their manner that they would make her welcome as one of the family.

But it was all too late. Another bridegroom had come, and pleaded, and Agnes had given her heart to Him, and she could not take it back. There was a struggle; not to renounce the bright prospects that were spread out before her in such tempting guise, but to inflict the pain of the renunciation upon others. This was the temptation that Madame de —— laid hold of and worked with unrelenting assiduity. Would it not be a nobler kind of sacrifice to forego her own desire, to renounce the higher

life of mystical union with God for the sake of those beloved ones to whom she owed so much? Was she likely even spiritually to lose by so doing, and would not God repay her sacrifice by granting her in the married state all the graces and helps towards sanctification that awaited her in the monastic life? To all this Agnes would answer with quiet, unvarying iteration: “ ‘ He that loveth father and mother better than me is not worthy of me.’ ”

“ When I repeat this,” she said one day to Madame de — as they were walking together on an elevated point that over-looked the valley where the picturesque old chateau with its park and winding river lay in luxuriant beauty at their feet, “ when I repeat the same words, Madame, I feel as if it were not I who said them, but some one else in me; I can’t help wondering how it is that neither your kindness, nor Monsieur Albert’s, nor all this pretty campaign that I admire so much, nor the thought of the happiness my marriage would bring to them at home, seems to touch me even as a temptation! I feel as I were not really here, but some one else in place of me.”

Madame de —, who had started on her mission rather in passive acquiescence with her son's wishes than moved by strong desire for its ultimate success, had been at first stimulated by Agnes's opposition, and gradually won by her gentleness and goodness, till she had set her heart upon winning her almost as ardently as Albert himself.

But the Marquise was a Christian, and moreover, what is not always synonymous even amongst good Catholics, she believed firmly in the doctrine of vocations. Once it became clear to her that Agnes had a vocation to the religious life, she ceased all opposition, and mentally resolved to fight the young girl's battle if necessary against the family and even against Albert.

Before Agnes left them, Albert, by his mother's permission, had a walk with her alone, and for the first and last time pleaded his cause openly and ardently. Agnes was distressed, but not the least frightened at this, to a French girl, most extraordinary and unparalleled proceeding on the part of a fiancé; she repeated what she had so distinctly said to his mother, thanked him with unabashed sim-

plicity for the kind feelings he had expressed towards her ; and asked him to think of her as a sister, while she would remember him always, and pray that he might be happy with a better wife than she could have made him.

Thus ended the visit which might have proved a pitfall to a less solid vocation, but which served only to confirm that of Agnes, and to convince those who had striven to shake it that "she had chosen the better part," and that it was in vain to try to take it from her.

She turned her back upon the fine old place, and the broad lands, and the loving young heart to whom her presence there would have made his home a paradise ; and relinquished all without so much as guessing that she had made a sacrifice.

One week later Agnes knocked at the door of the little monastery which, just a year ago, we had visited together, and asked to be admitted amongst the daughters of Saint Clare.

For three months after her entrance her headaches increased, and continued with unabated violence. Day or night she had no respite. Then suddenly they ceased never to return ; and with them disappeared every trace

of the debility that had made her life from childhood up so irksome that it had been little better than a sustained effort. The rule, which had few terrors for her in the distance, lost all its bitterness when she embraced it, and lay as lightly on her as a silken mantle. The perpetual silence; the bare feet without even a sandal between them and the ground; the unbroken fast; the broken sleep; the long hours of mental and vocal prayer on bended knees; the monotonous round of infinitesimal duties in the noviciate; Agnes found it all sweet and light and beautiful.

A friend who went to see her, or rather to hear through that dreadful black screen of St. Clares—a sheet of iron perforated with holes not bigger than a pin’s head—asked her if she did not find the rising at midnight very hard:

“Oh, no,” said Agnes, laughing, “on the contrary, I enjoy it; *cela vous repose du lit!*”

Any one who had sat upon a Poor Clare’s bed could readily believe that this was indeed the fact.

During the whole term of her noviciate she was never once obliged to accept a dispensation.

When the time was fixed for her profession, she wrote to me announcing it, and describing her happiness in terms that would sound like exaggerated romance if they referred to the most perfect earthly bliss ; but which were no doubt inadequate to express the foretaste of that bliss which it has not entered into the heart of man to conceive. She alluded with playful simplicity to the day when we had gone together to her present home, not reproaching me for my rude and stupid misconception of her outburst of emotion on beholding the saint-like old Abbess who was destined to be her spiritual mother, but thanking me with enthusiastic gratitude as having been the instrument of so great a gain, the beginning of such a happy end to her. So, in the sweet spring-time of her early girlhood, Agnes, who had rejected the flowery garland of an earthly bridal, crowned herself with the crown of thorns which the Poor Clare wears on the day of her nuptials with the King of Heaven. She wears the outward symbol for that day only ; but what is her life evermore but a prolonged commemoration of that mystery of the crown of *thorns* ?

I never saw her again but once, and that was in a dream. I saw the clouds rolled back, and through the open glory poured a flood of light and song; angels bearing lilies in their hands, let down a silver ladder from the sky; below, a virgin, lily-crowned, and robed in garments like the snow, and holding in her hand a lamp that shone like a saphyr star, stood with arms outstretched; and the angels trooping down exultant, with a voice like the voice of many waters, bore her up the ladder, and the Bridegroom, crowned and beautiful, and radiant as the sun, came forth to meet her. Then the clouds rolled back once more, the echo of the seraph's alleluias died away, and the glory faded from the sky.

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